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ABSTRACT

Over the past 15 years, child welfare agencies have begun to rely increasingly on relatives or people who have close emotional bonds to an abused or neglected child to act as foster parents. Today, almost all child welfare agencies consider kin the first placement choice when foster care is needed, and approximately one third of all children in foster care are kinship placements. Kin are often not "prepared" to care for children, however. Unlike traditional foster parents, kinship caregivers typically have not been licensed or trained as foster parents, typically have no experience with child welfare agencies, and are more likely to be single, poorer, older, have less formal education, and be in poorer health than non-kin foster parents. This policy brief examines how local child welfare agencies serve kinship foster care families, and confirms that, despite the greater needs of kinship caregivers, they are offered fewer services than non-kin foster parents, they request fewer services of caseworkers, and they face barriers to accessing services. The brief identifies a number of reasons—some related to caseworkers, some to kinship caregivers, and others to agency policies—that explain why kin often do not receive needed services. Findings in the brief are based on intensive case studies of local kinship care policies and frontline practices conducted by the Urban Institute during the Spring and Summer of 2001 in 13 counties in 4 states: Alabama, California, Connecticut, and Indiana. (HTH)

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Foster Children Placed with Relatives Often Receive Less Government Help: New Federalism Issues and Options for States. An Urban Institute Program to Assess Changing Social Policies, Series A, No. A-59.

Rob Geen

**The Urban Institute
Washington, DC**

April 2003

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Despite kin's greater needs, they are offered fewer services than non-kin foster parents, request fewer services, and face barriers to accessing services.

Foster Children Placed with Relatives Often Receive Less Government Help

Rob Geen

Everyone breathes a sigh of relief when there's relatives available, but they don't get enough attention. They're a little lower on the list because their case is more stable. Relatives don't call us and complain because they want to keep the kid and they're committed.

—a California foster care supervisor

Sometimes they don't know if it's okay to ask. Sometimes they are scared because they think we'll think they can't do it [care for a child].

—an Indiana child protective services worker

Child welfare agencies are responsible for ensuring that the children they place in foster care are cared for appropriately. Agencies may provide or refer children to a variety of services to meet their needs, including services that address issues arising from the abuse or neglect they suffered. Agencies also provide a variety of supports to foster care parents in their effort to care for children.

While child welfare agencies traditionally work with foster parents caring for children with whom they have no prior connection, over the past 15 years agencies have begun to rely increasingly on relatives or people who have a close emotional bond to an abused or neglected child to act as foster parents. Today, almost all child welfare agencies consider kin the first placement choice when foster care is needed, and approximately one-third of all children in foster care are in kinship care. Kinship foster parents differ from non-kin foster parents in several ways that may influence the services they, and the children they care for, need from child welfare agencies.

Kin are often not "prepared" to care for children. Unlike traditional foster parents,

kin typically have not been licensed as foster parents or attended training on what it means to be a foster parent before receiving a foster child. Kin are also typically not physically prepared to take on parenting responsibilities. They may not have many things needed to care for children, including a crib or bed, car seat, and toys. Many kin are also not emotionally prepared for their new roles. Since most kin are grandparents, in addition to assuming new parenting responsibilities, they must acknowledge the failure of their own children to parent effectively.

Kin typically have no experience with child welfare agencies. Unless they have been a foster parent before, kin typically do not understand the child welfare system. They do not know what to expect from the child welfare caseworker and the courts. They may also mistrust or fear the child welfare system.

Kin themselves may face many challenges that most non-kin foster parents do not. Research has consistently shown that kinship foster parents are more likely to be single, poorer, older, and have less formal education than non-kin foster parents (Ehrle and Geen 2002). While evidence is mixed, some studies have found that kin are more likely than non-kin foster parents to be working. Kinship foster parents also more often report being in poor health.

State policies indicate that kin are generally eligible to receive the same services as non-kin foster parents (Jantz et al. 2002). However, past research has clearly shown that in practice, kin foster parents and the children in their care receive fewer services. Kin are offered fewer services, request fewer services, and receive fewer of the services they request (Barth et al. 1994; Berrick, Barth, and Needell 1994; Chipungu and Everett 1994; Chipungu et al. 1998; Cook

This brief encapsulates findings from *Kinship Care: Making the Most of a Valuable Resource*, an upcoming UI Press book edited by Rob Geen. *Kinship Care* is scheduled for release in late 2003. For more information about this title, please visit <http://www.uiPress.org>.

Kin caregivers often need counseling services to help them deal with birth parents, their own feelings about parenting again, and their new relationships to their related children.

and Ciarico 1998). At the same time, past research has not identified reasons for this disparity.

This brief examines how local child welfare agencies serve kinship foster care families. We confirm that, despite kin's greater needs, they are offered fewer services than non-kin foster parents, they request fewer services of caseworkers than non-kin foster parents, and they face barriers to accessing services. Moreover, we identify a number of reasons—some related to caseworkers, some to kinship caregivers, and others to agency policies—that explain why kin often do not receive needed services. Findings in this brief are based on intensive case studies of local kinship care policies and frontline practices conducted by the Urban Institute during the spring and summer of 2001 in 13 counties in four states—Alabama, California, Connecticut, and Indiana.¹

Kin Often Have Different Needs than Non-Kin Foster Parents

In all of our study sites, workers, administrators, and kinship foster parents documented that kinship care families often have different needs than non-kin foster families. Their different needs stem from the fact that compared with non-kin foster parents, kin are more likely to be poor, working outside the home, older, less educated, unprepared for their new caregiving role, and isolated from others in the community. Workers also noted that since many kin try to take care of things without child welfare assistance, when they do ask for help they are often in a crisis situation. Thus their needs are more immediate and intense. Workers also pointed out that kin are a very heterogeneous group and have varying needs depending upon individual circumstances.

According to workers, the starkest difference between kin and non-kin foster parents is the level of financial assistance needed by kin. Few non-kin foster parents are poor. In most states, sufficient income is a foster care licensing criterion. However, kin are often in financial distress or just getting by. And this is before they take on the responsibility of caring for a child.

In addition to income differences, workers noted that kin are more likely than non-kin foster parents to need child care assistance. Non-kin foster parents are more likely to be married and often at least one

parent is not working full-time outside the home. Thus, non-kin foster parents often have less need for child care assistance.² Most kin are single and work outside the home. Given their already tenuous financial situation, kin have great difficulty locating child care they can afford. In several locations we visited, workers noted that they would open or keep open a child welfare case mainly as a way to secure child care assistance for kin.

Another key difference between kin and non-kin foster parents is their relationship with the birth parents of the children they are caring for. Kin caregivers often need counseling services to help them deal with birth parents, their own feelings about parenting again, and their new relationships to their related children.

Because kin are often older and not well-educated, workers and kin noted that they need more support in meeting children's educational needs and providing recreational opportunities. Several kin noted it was hard for them to assist children with their homework and they wanted to get tutoring help. Other kin questioned whether they were doing a good job as a foster parent, because their age limited what they could do with the children. Because of their age and lack of transportation, kin are often isolated from others in the community, according to caseworkers. While non-kin often interact with other foster parents through foster parent associations, kin have only recently been encouraged to participate in such groups.

Kin Are Offered Fewer Services

In each of the sites we visited, caseworkers, supervisors, and administrators acknowledged that kinship foster parents are typically offered fewer services. Many workers noted that they offer few services to kin and non-kin foster parents unless there is an obvious need. If foster parents do not ask for help, many workers assume that they are doing fine. Many workers noted that they spend most of their time handling crises, thus they have little time to assist foster parents who do not complain or seek out assistance.

Other workers commented that they tend to have higher expectations for kinship foster parents. Because kin know the child in their care and have an emotional bond with that child, workers sometimes assumed that the kin would take good care

Because kin do not always complete the same licensing process as non-kin foster parents, kin may not receive or even be eligible for a variety of services.

of the child and did not need agency assistance. Workers know that kin will continue caring for children even without close attention from the agency, and thus feel less obligated to assist kin.

Several workers who reported offering fewer services to kin were concerned about kinship foster parents becoming dependent upon the public agency services and support. These workers argued that their job was to help kinship caregivers become self-sufficient. Some workers felt that kin tried to exploit the system to get additional support.

Kin may also be offered fewer services than non-kin foster parents because they are rarely recruited by private foster care agencies. In many states, child welfare agencies contract with private Family Foster Care Agencies (FFAs) to recruit, license, monitor, and support foster parents. Many workers noted that FFAs provide greater support than the public agency can, both financial support as well as services. But workers said that very few kin are part of FFAs. Many of the services that kin reported having difficulty accessing from community providers are provided to non-kin foster parents directly through FFAs.

Kin Request Fewer Services

While child welfare workers and administrators agreed that the agency typically offered fewer services to kin, they also agreed that kin generally request fewer services than non-kin foster parents. Workers suggested that the reasons kin tend not to request many services include not knowing what is available, fear of the agency, and kin's feelings that they do not need or want agency assistance.

Many workers reported that kin are often not open to agency assistance, because they either did not feel services are needed or simply have a "take care of my own" attitude. Other workers noted that kin's pride stepped in the way of their requesting help from the agency. Kin may be reluctant to admit to themselves that they need assistance.

Many workers commented that kin often do not understand what they are getting themselves into. They think they will be caring for a child for a short period of time and that they can handle it. They do not always focus on the needs of the child and the costs associated with caring for the

child, especially if the child is not returned home quickly.

Moreover, because kin lack experience with the child welfare system, they are often not aware of services that may be available and are thus less likely to request these services. As mentioned earlier, unlike non-kin foster parents, kin rarely are part of foster parent associations, a key source of information about what services may be available.

Workers reported that kin also request fewer services because they may be seeking to avoid agency contact. Some kin intentionally hide information from agency workers, especially information related to the birth parent, because they do not want to do anything that may jeopardize the birth parent's ability to get the child back. Other kin hide information from caseworkers because they do not want the intrusion of the agency, preferring to handle the situation privately.

Workers also reported that many kin are afraid to ask for assistance, believing that if they ask for assistance, the agency will conclude that they are not capable of caring for the child. Kin also may not be very assertive in asking for assistance because they fear the agency will view them as difficult.

Kin Face Barriers to Accessing Services

Even when kin request services or workers seek to offer services, kin may have difficulty accessing the services they need. Kin are not eligible for a variety of services or have difficulty completing applications for assistance. Kin often have difficulty finding services available from community agencies. Workers who wanted to help kin obtain support often reported having difficulty assisting them. Workers noted that kin often have to wait a long time to obtain the supports they need.

Because kin do not always complete the same licensing process as non-kin foster parents,³ kin may not receive or even be eligible for a variety of services. In addition to a monthly foster care payment, foster parents are automatically provided a variety of services including health insurance for the children they care for; payment of health-related services not covered under insurance; vouchers for clothing, school supplies, or other specific needs; and child care and respite care assistance. In many

Both caseworkers and kinship caregivers could benefit from additional training.

states, kin who are not licensed foster parents are denied foster care payments and instead may have to apply for financial support through the welfare office. Not only are the welfare payments significantly less than the foster care payments, but also many kin are either not eligible for the payments or have difficulty obtaining support.

Kin may not be eligible to receive other services or supports that are available to non-kin foster parents depending upon the local child welfare agency. For example, workers in Alabama noted that children being cared for by kin receive Medicaid, which does not pay for some needed items. The child welfare agency pays for these expenses when children are in non-kin foster care, but not if they are placed with kin. In one local office in California, administrators noted that respite care services are available to non-kin but not kin foster parents, and in another local office workers noted that obtaining day care for kin was problematic.

One of the main barriers to kin accessing services is knowledge; because most kin lack experience with the child welfare system, they do not know where to look for or how to access community resources. Workers in several states noted that a key problem for many kin foster parents is finding doctors who accept Medicaid. While non-kin foster parents face the same problem, many have developed relationships with doctors who accept Medicaid. In one California local office, both kin and non-kin receive health insurance for their foster children, but kin who do not receive foster care payments receive health insurance through a managed care organization that makes it more difficult to access services.

Even when workers try to help kin access services, kin may not be as successful as non-kin foster parents. Based on information collected from workers in many sites, many workers do not understand the eligibility requirements for services provided by other agencies. Many workers were frustrated that they themselves did not know the services available to foster children. They noted that in some cases experienced foster parents know more than they do.

Kin also have difficulty accessing services when they need them. Workers and kin reported that the wait for services can be long and place a considerable burden on kin during the waiting period. This is particularly true for services linked to licensing. Unlike non-kin foster parents, kin are

typically not licensed when they begin caring for a child and the licensing process can take two months to a year or even longer.

Summary and Discussion

We found almost unanimous consensus (from administrators, supervisors, workers, judges, and kin) that kinship foster parents receive fewer services for the children in their care than non-kin foster parents despite having greater service needs. While there are a number of subtle differences across states and localities for why kin receive fewer services, for the most part, there are a few key reasons that were true for all sites we visited.

- **Workers offer fewer services to kin than to non-kin foster parents.** Some workers acknowledged that they have higher expectations of kin or that they do not want kin to become dependent upon the public agency. However, most workers acknowledged that, for a variety of reasons, the agency was simply failing to adequately meet the needs of kin.
- **Kin request fewer services of caseworkers than non-kin foster parents.** Kin do not know what to ask for, are afraid to ask out of fear of appearing unable to care for a child, or may simply want to avoid public agency intrusion.
- **Kin face barriers to accessing services.** Kin are often unable to obtain support when they seek it out because of eligibility constraints, lack of familiarity with community resources, or waiting lists for services.

These findings suggest that both caseworkers and kinship caregivers could benefit from additional training. Caseworkers acknowledged that working with kin was in many ways different than working with non-kin foster parents, yet few had received any information or training on how to approach kinship caregivers differently. Workers also admitted to having limited knowledge of community resources, often relying on non-kin foster parents for information to advise kinship caregivers. Moreover, many workers appeared confused about the eligibility criteria and the application process for a variety of public services which kin are eligible to receive.

Unlike with non-kin, many child welfare agencies do not require kinship caregivers to complete any formal training to be a foster parent. Since kin are caring for a specific child they already know, they may

When support is linked to licensing, many kin will fail to receive support since many are not licensed.

not need to complete the exact training that non-kin foster parents complete. However, it seems obvious that kin could use training in a variety of areas related to service delivery, including what services are available from the child welfare agency, other public services kin may be eligible for and how to apply, and services available from community agencies.

Child welfare agencies may also want to examine their policies to determine if kin are inadvertently being denied services they may need to help care for a child. When support is linked to licensing, many kin will fail to receive support since many are not licensed, and those that are seeking licensure may take considerable time to complete the licensing process. Workers also identified a need for greater clarity in child welfare agency policies about the services that may be available for kin.

Child welfare agencies should also experiment with new approaches to engage kinship care families. Family group conferencing programs (also called family group decisionmaking) that bring the entire family network together to plan for the care of a child appear to be a promising approach that many agencies have implemented. Agencies may also want to explore ways to bring kinship foster parents together more. In many localities, experienced foster parents are recruited to mentor new non-kin foster parents. This approach may also work well with kinship foster parents. In addition, non-kin foster parents benefit greatly from participation in foster parent associations. Increasingly, child welfare agencies are helping to develop kinship caregiver support groups. Support groups can not only provide an opportunity for kin to share experiences with one another, they can also be an effective approach for educating kin about the child welfare system and services available to them.

Foster children can benefit from the love and commitment of kinship caregivers and from a sense of belonging and permanency. However, these children still experience the trauma of being separated from their parents. Whether they are placed with kin or non-kin foster parents, foster children require considerable support. Child welfare agencies need to reflect on the uniqueness of kinship care arrangements and develop strategies to ensure that kinship caregivers have the necessary knowledge and resources to best care for children entrusted to them.

Notes

1. Alabama: Jefferson (Birmingham), Mobile, and Taladega Counties; California: Los Angeles, San Diego, Santa Clara (San Jose), and Santa Cruz Counties; Connecticut: Bridgeport, Hartford, and Torrington Counties; and Indiana: Lake (Gary), La Porte, and Marion (Indianapolis) Counties.
2. At the same time, workers noted that child care was becoming more of an issue in recent years for non-kin foster parents as well because there are more non-kin foster families with two working foster parents.
3. See Jantz et al. (2002) for a complete discussion of state policies for licensing kin as foster parents.

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This series is dedicated to the memory of Steven D. Gold, who was codirector of *Assessing the New Federalism* until his death in August 1996.

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